

# Guest commentary: Don't miss this opportunity; authorize a rapid transit authority

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The time is now for southeast Michigan to take the next important step toward a stronger economy. Far too often, partisan disagreements get in the way of progress, but right now we have a unique opportunity to rise above the old divisions of the past and make an investment in our region's future.

As leaders from the business community, organized labor and the federal government, we have united to call on our elected officials in Lansing to pass legislation to create a regional transit authority (RTA).

This is a time-sensitive matter. The federal government is poised to invest hundreds of millions of dollars to match \$120 million in private investments, but this is contingent on the formation of an RTA. This is an opportunity for Michigan taxpayers to see some of their hard-earned federal tax dollars return to the state in needed infrastructure that will spur job creation and economic growth. If Lansing does not act now, these federal dollars could end up being invested in another state.

One might wonder why business and labor are coming together to back this proposal. The answer is simple: Investing in a regional transit system will create thousands of new jobs for Michiganders by providing new economic development opportunities for businesses to thrive in all of our communities.

When you look at the benefits of investing in a regional transit system, it's obvious why such a diverse coalition, including a group of bipartisan leaders in Lansing, is uniting on this issue.

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First and foremost, to accelerate Michigan's economic recovery and to be competitive in the global marketplace, the greater Detroit region must once again be on the path to success -- and a common element of successful cities is effective regional transit.

A great example is Cleveland's Euclid Avenue Corridor, where they've invested \$200 million in a Bus Rapid Transit system that has generated more than \$4.3 billion in new private investments. By installing fixed stations, they created hubs of activity where entrepreneurs launched new businesses, investors have built new attractive housing, and once depressed neighborhoods have started to grow.

These investments will also create thousands of new, good-paying jobs for workers in our region. Construction workers will build the transit system, skilled people will operate the system, and new retailers will hire employees to serve the thousands of riders who go to transit stations every day.

With these new jobs, more of our neighbors will have more money in their pockets to spend at other businesses throughout our region, creating even more jobs and ensuring greater job security.

Finally, with up to 90% of low-income individuals lacking reliable transportation, a new regional transit system will give them the means to find and keep a job or access needed skills training. For many of our neighbors, access to mass transit is a pathway out of poverty and into the middle class -- and that's good for all of us.

Effective mass transit is about much more than just getting from point A to point B; it's about driving economic growth and making this a more attractive place for both businesses and employees.

Because of all of the positive ways regional transit will grow our economy, we've brought a diverse coalition together to get it done. Now it's time for Lansing to join us. There are not many major public policy issues the three of us can readily agree on, but this is one where Democrats and Republicans, employers and employees, and urban and suburban interests all agree. Let's act now.

*Gary Peters, a Democrat from Bloomfield Township, represents Michigan's 9th District in the U.S. House of Representatives. Sandy Baruah is president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber. Chris Michalak is president of the metro Detroit AFL-CIO.*